

London mass strike, 1889



A short account of the mass strike in London which spread from the great docks strike in the East End and peaked on 1 September with up to 300,000 strikers

"The proverbial small spark has kindled a great fire which threatens to envelop the whole metropolis."
(*The Evening News*, 27th August 1889)

The seminal strike of the London dockers in 1889 began on 14th August, as thousands slaving in one of the hardest, most insecure and worst paid job in London refused to work until wages were raised, minimum hours guaranteed, and other conditions improved. Within a few days the port of London was a standstill. There was widespread sympathy for the dockers, but money for strike pay was scarce. But a strong campaign of processions into the City, calls for support going out nationally and internationally, and effective picketing and blocking of scabbing, kept the struggle powerful.

The dockers' strike may itself have been partly inspired by the 1888 matchgirls' strike and the agitation of the East End gas stokers for better wages and conditions... But the outbreak of the strike itself lit a fuse among London workers, especially the low paid and casually employed.

A rash of strikes and disputes broke out in the second half of August and early September 1889; concentrated in (though not limited to) East London. In a rough triangle between the City, Kings Cross and Blackwall, there were at least 50 strikes outside of the docks. In South and west London there were at least another 16.

A newspaper report listed some of the trades that had come out: "coal men, match girls, parcels postmen, carmen [candriers], rag, bone and paper porters and pickers and the employees in jam, biscuit, rope, iron, screw, clothing and railways works..." Not included here is the large-scale strike of Jewish tailors in the East End in August-September. It has been suggested that 300,000 workers in London were out on strike on September 1st 1889, a huge number, which may even be an underestimate.

There was also a rent strike in Commercial Road in Stepney: a banner in Hungerford Street announced "As We are on strike landlords need not call", following it with a rhyme:



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Our husbands on strike: for the wives it is not funny

And we all think it is not right to pay the landlord money

Everyone is on strike; so landlords do not be offended

The rent that's due we'll pay when the strike is ended.

The spreading of the strike into social struggle in this way was hardly surprising in East London, where workers often lived close to their work, in close proximity to others who worked with them, and in dire poverty. Solidarity was a necessity. Many of the workers erupting were largely unskilled or semi-skilled, like the matchgirls and dockers, traditionally ignored by the craft unions of the skilled workers who had achieved relatively good wages and conditions and a position in society. This wave of 'new unionism' as it became known was spreading practical and committed trade union organization among those who the 'aristocracy of labour' had long considered feckless and not capable of collective bargaining. But it was also confrontational, where many of the craft unions had long settled into a collaborative relationship with employers. The status quo was threatened in more ways than one.

The whole of working class London was in ferment. The spreading of the strike

to other trades began to worry the establishment – how many other industries would follow suit? A committee of the great and the good was formed to try to get the dock strike settled before things got too out of hand. The intransigent employers were to some extent leant upon to give concessions in order to lessen the pressure on London's economy being jacked up as strike after strike broke out.

The bourgeois press of course was largely scathing of the strikes; the language used is interesting, as in several reports the spreading of strike action is likened to disease. "Strike Fever"... "the infectious example of coming out on strike"... "the infection has spread to other classes of laboring men..."

Workers attempting to collectively push for a rise on wages to levels they can survive on and conditions bearable to work under are basically a plague, a pox, a sickness. It's obvious real y.

But if the employers were nervous and the press jumpy, the leaders of the dockers' strike were also unnerved by the strike wave that their dispute had to some extent unleashed.

The Strike Committee's response to the wildfire of class struggle had not been exactly joy... Far from it. To some extent they saw it as a distraction, likely to reduce donations for their own struggle, and as threatening the public sympathy the dock strike had garnered; they also disapproved of strikers simply walking out without organising in a union first. This they justified by suggesting that unionisation was essential for winning any dispute.

They issued a statement in late August: "We, the undersigned, strongly deprecate the rash action taken by unorganised workmen not directly connected with dock work of coming out on strike without reflecting that by doing so they are increasing the strain upon the upon the strike committee's resources. Organisation must precede strikes, or defeat is certain."

To some extent the committee's view reflected a rigid approach that wasn't taking account of the strength of enthusiasm spreading through the city. Rather than struggle growing from organisation, organisation was growing from struggle, all around them.

The statement seems to have created an intense debate, among the strike organisers and leaders, because on two days later, they took a step that directly

contradicted the spirit of it. On 28th August the dock strike committee voted to issue a call for a general strike in London – not only recognising the strength of the widening strike wave, but arguing by implication that its extension would achieve a victory for the dockers.

It can only be imagined what might have then developed. Perhaps the wave had already reached its peak; but perhaps it might have lit a fuse that could not be put out.

In the end it is speculation, as less than a day later, before the call had in fact really been made, the committee reversed the general strike call. Some socialists and anarchists later denounced the decision as betraying a potential revolutionary situation... It has also been suggested that the call for a general strike was itself a last desperate throw, with the strike committee afraid that the dock strike was on the verge of collapsing; that it was calling for something that could not happen, a bluff that could only be called.

Whatever the truth of it, withdrawing the call did not abate the spread of organization through the unskilled workers of London, though it may have signaled to the dock owners and employers in general that the committee were willing to deal with disputes on an individual level, rather than escalate to an all-out class war. In this sense it may have hastened the settlement of the dock strike a few days later, with the winning of a wage rise. Unionisation continued to spread among the unskilled, though there were many battles to come, and victories were often followed by the clawing back of concessions.

The last few days of August and early September 1889 though, remain a time evocative and compelling, when both spontaneous activity and organization were growing, when possibilities seemed open...

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